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ABSTRACT

Over the last 20 years, the percentage of older students on college campuses has increased dramatically. Because developmental needs, issues, and stressors for adults differ from those of younger students, the college environment must be reconsidered to respond to adult students. Adult learners tend to be achievement oriented, highly motivated, and relatively independent with special needs for flexible schedules and instruction appropriate for their developmental level. Adults generally prefer more active approaches to learning and value opportunities to integrate academic learning with their life and work experiences. Financial and family concerns are two major considerations for adult students. Adults may return to college because of changing job requirements, family life transitions, changes in leisure patterns, and self-fulfillment. Nontraditional students need many different kinds of support and assistance from family, friends, and institutions of higher learning. Research suggests that adult men and women may vary in their motivations for returning to school, the pressures and challenges they face as adult students, and the types of student services they desire. A number of studies have identified adult student needs for services which have implications for the student affairs profession. The willingness of institutions to modify existing programs and develop new services geared to adult populations will have a positive impact on their ability to attract, serve, and satisfy the educational needs of adult students. (NB)

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EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES, DEVELOPMENTAL CHALLENGES: UNDERSTANDING NONTRADITIONAL COLLEGE STUDENTS

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EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES, DEVELOPMENTAL CHALLENGES: UNDERSTANDING NONTRADITIONAL COLLEGE STUDENTS

Nontraditional Students Defined

Cross (1980) defined the *nontraditional student* as an adult who returns to school full- or part-time while maintaining responsibilities such as employment, family, and other responsibilities of adult life. These students also may be referred to as "adult students," "re-entry students," "returning students," and "adult learners." While these older students share classroom space and educational experiences with traditional-age students (ages 18-24), their developmental needs, issues, and stressors differ considerably from their younger student-peers. Moreover, men and women may vary somewhat in their motivations for returning to school, the pressures and challenges they face as adult students, and the types of student services desired. Because developmental needs, issues, and stressors for adults differ considerably from those faced by younger, "traditional-age" students, all aspects of the college environment must be reconsidered (and often reconfigured) to respond to this growing student population (Benshoff, 1991).

Prevalence of Nontraditional Students on Campus

Over the last twenty years, the percentage of older students on campuses has increased dramatically. From one-third to one-half of all college students are classified as nontraditional and more than 50% of all graduate students are over 30 years of age

(Aslanian & Brickell, 1980). While college enrollments have been declining since the 1960s, the percentage of nontraditional students enrolling in colleges and universities is steadily increasing (Hu, 1985). One national survey (Appling, 1991) found that "of the 11 million undergraduates enrolled in postsecondary institutions in the fall of 1986:

- 4.1 million were independent
- 4.2 million attended school part-time
- 4.4 million were 24 years old or older ... [and]
- 445,000 were single parents" (p. 7).

Clearly, the college student population has changed quite dramatically over the past few years. Brazziel (1989) noted that "adults are the fastest-growing segment of all the population groups in higher education" (p. 116). The number of older students on campuses was expected to increase by more than one million by 1990 (Boaz & Kay, 1980), with this trend expected to continue for the foreseeable future (Aslanian, 1990).

Characteristics of Nontraditional Students

A number of factors characteristically separate nontraditional students from younger college students. Adult learners tend to be achievement oriented, highly motivated, and relatively independent with special needs for flexible schedules and instruction appropriate for their developmental level (Cross, 1980). Adults generally prefer more active approaches to learning and value opportunities to integrate academic learning

with their life and work experiences (Benshoff, 1991).

Financial and family concerns are two of the biggest considerations that impact on the adult student experience. The financial impact of returning to college may be greater for adults who must finance education themselves while maintaining other financial commitments (e.g., mortgage payments, family support) (Benshoff, 1991). Adults who return to school are overwhelmingly commuters who live, work, and (usually) play away from the college campus. Many older students are parents and many of these are single parents (Appling, 1991). Conflicting findings seem to suggest that adult students may be employed either full- or part-time, and may be either married or single (Aslanian, 1990; Richter-Antion, 1986; Sewall, 1984; Streeter, 1980).

Additional factors (Richter-Antion, 1986) which distinguish nontraditional students from traditional students include:

- stronger consumer orientation (education as an investment)
- multiple non-school-related commitments and responsibilities
- lack of an age cohort, and
- limited social acceptability and support for their student status (operating outside of traditional adult roles).

Krager, Wrenn, and Hirt (1990) note two additional characteristics common to many adult learners: "mistrust of

abilities in the college setting and confusion over relations with authority" (p. 41).

Why Adults Return to School

Many nontraditional students come back to school to complete educational pursuits they began years before as traditional-age students. They may have dropped out (or "stopped out") of education for a number of reasons, including financial considerations, competing responsibilities, and lack of focus, motivation, and maturity. Some younger students lack the maturity or the motivation necessary to complete their education and drop out; they may then return as older, more motivated and mature students to finish what they began as adolescents (Aslanian, 1990). Changing job requirements or career changes often force adults to get additional education to survive or advance in the job market (Aslanian & Brickell, 1980). According to Brazziel (1989), "the ever upward progression of an educated adult population and workforce and [increased educational requirements for] high-paying jobs . . . might be the single most powerful factor" (p. 129) in the continued influx of adult students on college campuses. Other major reasons that adults return to college include family life transitions (marriage, divorce, death), changes in leisure patterns, and self-fulfillment (Aslanian & Brickell, 1980). Finally, one study found desire for social contact to be one of four major factors in adults returning to school (Rogers, Gilleland, & Dixon, 1987).

Aslanian and Brickell (1980) proposed a "triggers and transitions" theory that relates the adult's decision to return to school to developmental issues and crises faced during midlife. According to this theory, most adult learners are motivated to return to school by a desire (or need) to move from one status or role to another. Examples of transitions during midlife include changes related to career, marital status or family situation, leisure, or other life roles. *Transitions* require new knowledge, skills, and/or credentials that often lead people back to college. *Triggers* are events that precipitate the timing of an adult's decision to return to school, most frequently career events (loss of job, new job opportunities, failure to be promoted) and family changes (separation, divorce, remarriage, parenting). Transitions explain the need for new learning to cope with new roles while triggers determine the timing of the adult's return to school. Adults return to school primarily due to career (56%) and family (16%) transitions that were precipitated by career- (56%) and family (36%)-related triggering events (Aslanian & Brickell, 1980).

Needs of Nontraditional Students

Developmental theorists, such as Erikson and Chickering, have recognized the developmental challenges that typically confront adults who return to school, recognizing that "any significant life event can promote a return to earlier themes" (Krager et al., 1990, p. 410. This "recycling" of developmental

issues involves "not just a return to a previous stage but a revisiting of themes in qualitatively and quantitatively different ways. Progress through the revisiting is dependent on [both] the individual and the context" (Krager et al., 1990, p. 42). Chickering (Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989) also recognized that older students may "recycle" through the developmental tasks described in his seven vectors of college student development. Because adult students confront these vectors with greater maturity and life experiences, their ability to resolve these developmental challenges depends on the individual nature of their life experiences, their personalities, and their ability to deal with the competing responsibilities and demands that adult students typically must manage (Krager et al., 1990).

Nontraditional students need many different kinds of support and assistance from family, friends, and institutions of higher learning. Research evidence suggests that "both [sexes] have difficulties juggling the roles of student, worker, and family member" (Muench, 1987, p. 10). Adult students need help in building their self-confidence as students, in acquiring or refreshing study skills, and in managing their time and other resources while in school. In addition, adult students benefit from opportunities to interact with their peers and need to be actively involved in the educational process through sharing their relevant work and life experiences (Muench, 1987). Agar

(1990) found that nontraditional students reported gaps between their earlier school experiences and the university environment in the areas of institutional size, teaching styles, individualized attention, educational resources, standards for academic performance, socioeconomic necessities and expectations, and peer group supports. Any of these perceived gaps can complicate the adjustment of adults who return to college.

Research on Nontraditional Students

Clayton and Smith (1987) identified eight primary motivations for nontraditional women students' decisions to pursue an undergraduate degree: self-improvement; self-actualization; vocational; role; family; social; humanitarian; and, knowledge. Many of these women (56%) cited multiple motives for returning to school, with more than 25% identifying role change as the primary motivating factor. In a study of married re-entry women students, Hooper (1979) found that: the longer the woman had been a successful student, the higher her self-esteem; the longer the woman had been in school, the higher the anxiety experienced by the husband; and, the more traditional the roles and responsibilities within the family, the greater the guilt the woman experienced about her student role.

Other developmental issues for women who return to school (Terrell, 1990) include:

- feeling guilty about not "being there" for their children
- concerns about quality and expense of childcare

- feelings of responsibility for maintaining their role within the family
- making compromises in careers due to family considerations
- minimal individual free time
- perceived lack of credibility when returning to college
- insufficient support from family for returning to school.

In addition, Kahnweiler and Johnson (1980) identified several key developmental issues for the female nontraditional student:

- introspective concerns
- concerns about physical development and appearance
- shift in time perspective
- concerns about change roles as wife and/or mother
- concerns about changes in role/relationship with aging parents
- feelings of uniqueness and isolation in confronting midlife issues.

Returning to school, divorce, and separation were the most frequently mentioned midlife events for women (Kahnweiler & Johnson, 1980).

Wheaton and Robinson (1983) identified a number of external and internal barriers to success for women who returned to school. Internal barriers included guilt and anxiety about placing their own desires/needs above those of their families, lack of self-confidence, and a general lack of decision making skills. External barriers included: standardized tests required

for admissions; lack of financial aid for part-time students; lack of child care; and, increased family demands on time (Wheaton & Robinson, 1983). In a study of satisfaction and strain among women over the age of 35 who returned to school, Novak and Thacker (1991) found that while most subjects expressed above-average satisfaction in their role as students, most also felt strained as a result of returning to school. Major sources of satisfaction included achievement and meeting challenges, increasing their knowledge, self-improvement and increased self-confidence, and intellectual stimulation. Primary sources of strain included time pressures, family demands, anxieties related to academic demands and abilities, and fear of failure (Novak & Thacker, 1991).

Research on nontraditional male students is limited. In one study, Muench (1987) found that both sexes experienced fears of failure and self-doubt. Men, however, suffered more from lack of self-confidence, while women experienced more guilt feelings. Bauer and Mott (1990) found that, among the nontraditional students they studied:

- men were changing careers while women were looking to advance within the same career field
- women more than men experienced competing pressures of child care, financial, and school responsibilities
- men more than women tended to be frustrated about loss of time and money in returning to school.

Robertson (1991) found that men progressed significantly more rapidly through their academic programs than did women and that women experienced significantly more interruptions in their programs of study.

Implications for Student Affairs

Nontraditional students present some major challenges for institutions of higher learning whose programs and services have been geared to the traditional-age student population. The wide diversity of characteristics and needs among adult students makes them difficult to reach with information and services (Streeter, 1980). The fact that nontraditional students are overwhelmingly commuters makes reaching them with programs and services even more of a challenge because they typically come on campus primarily to attend classes and to use library and research facilities. Their involvement in campus life and activities is typically restricted to their academic coursework. They are unlikely to become involved in extracurricular activities on campus and are highly selective in their use of student services.

What services, then, do adult students require? Results of a 1981 study identified several primary needs, including: improved speaking, math, reading, and study skills; learning about job opportunities; developing test taking, decision making, and stress management skills; and, identifying individual strengths and abilities (Spratt, 1984). Other studies of adult

students (Martin, 1980; Rawlins, 1979) have cited additional needs for services, including:

- separate registration, advising, and orientation services
- adequate parking
- more evening, weekend, and summer course offerings
- assistance with financial aid and housing
- information services and communication networks
- social networking and support
- educating university faculty and staff about needs of nontraditional students
- increased awareness of and access to personal, academic, and career counseling services.

Novak and Thacker (1991) found that reentry women students identified the most important institutional supports as availability of weekend, evening, and off-campus classes, assistance from professors, financial aid, and counseling services for adults.

Studies of adult students have identified a number of additional services to better meet their needs, including:

- separate registration, advising, and orientation
- greater availability of and access to parking
- more evening and weekend course offerings
- special assistance with financial aid and housing, and
- better preparation of faculty and staff to meet the needs of adult students.

Byrd (1990) recommended that colleges and universities address a number of institutional barriers identified by adult students, such as providing academic credit for life and work experiences, establishing more liberal admissions requirements, making financial aid information more readily available, providing child care.

Thon (1984) found that the student services most often implemented for adults were counseling- and career-related. Services that adults considered important (but which were least often available to them) included health services, publications for adults, and qualified staff to work with nontraditional students. In addition, colleges must offer social activities appropriate for both older students and their families. Innovative and creative approaches often must be implemented to effectively communicate information about both academic and student services programs to nontraditional students who overwhelmingly commute and attend school on a part-time basis.

Conclusion

Nontraditional students are causing institutions of higher learning to re-think the focus of academic and student affairs programs. Research has shown that nontraditional students have needs that differ from those of traditional-age students (Richter-Antion, 1986; Thon, 1984). The willingness of institutions to modify existing programs and develop new services

geared to adult populations will have a positive impact on their ability to attract, serve, and satisfy the educational needs of adult students.

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